

Ripples from the Past

Chapter 9 – Grey Walker

“Slap, slap, slap.’

Chlo quite liked the sound her bare feet made on the stone floor of the corridor. She could have stopped the sound, walked above the floor, put on shoes, or simply moved her reality to her destination. But she chose to do none of those options and turned into another darkened corridor. ‘Slap, slap, slap.’”

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Chlo hadn’t actually carried out the deed, nor had it been her decision to be so brutal. It had been her findings though, her assessment of the situation, which had led Sikush to decide on a course of action.

“There is stasis for a few thousand years Chlo, but I really don’t think that’s a realistic option.”

He’d been right of course, though she now hated him for being right. It was illogical of course, to hate him, when the data showed only one course of action met all the required results. She hated herself of course and was projecting that hate onto him. Knowing that didn’t help. She felt for the part of the mind they shared, finding him there, waiting for her.

“Bastard !”

“I know Chlo, but far better this way, than allowing panic to spread right through the empire.”

She could look through his eyes, watching the council meeting he was attending. Applications for trading licences, the usual moans about this or that, maybe a little extra funding for the militia. All so ordinary, after what he’d just done, what they’d just done.

“At least we won’t lose the craft.” He said.

“Bastard !”

“I know, yet it’s part of the job, keeping it safe. One day it might be just you and I Chlo, dragging it across the wastes. Not yet though, not yet !”

“Sorry, I do understand, it’s just that.....”

“I’m a bastard, I know. Someone has to be though.”

“I understand.” She said.

She felt better and she really did understand. The expansion and prosperity of the empire was nice, but it was only a means to an end. The stability just made it easier to defend Mendera, easier to make sure that he never left his prison. They’d once had to dig his prison out of the ground, when the planet Optilion was about to die. Oh yes, planets did die, she’d seen far too many boil away into nothingness, when the multiverse decided to restart. Mendera was different though, it was eternal, unaffected by the switches, which occurred so rarely, that most intelligent life was unaware of the cycle. Chlo actually shed a few tears, maybe for Mendera, maybe for herself, maybe even for him, the bastard.

“If Mendera dies, it might just be you and I left.” She muttered.

He’d often said that it might end up with just the two of them, pulling his prison across the wastes of eternity. He could never be allowed to escape, that would mean the end of everything.

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Destiny Forty Eight was owned by the Parallax Mining Company. They had never owned a huge number of craft, nine to be precise. Someone at their public relations company had come up with the idea that beginning the numbering at forty five, would be a good idea.

"It'll give the impression of size, of permanence, of stability."

They'd been right, Parallax Mining had survived several major recessions and one complete destruction of its headquarters building. It was perceived as a good investment and every shares issue had been fully taken up. That said, the crews of their mining supply craft, weren't exactly top drawer.

"It'll mean slowing down and dropping out of our time slot for Phlot beacon." Said Commander Zin Ganaan. "That will cause extra paperwork Mel, lots of it."

Zin hated anything that messed up the routine of the craft. He especially hated anything that meant paperwork and missing beacon slots. He was even beginning to hate Mel Habnah, his science officer. She was a good kid, but she seemed to delight in finding ways to fuck up the smooth routine of Destiny Forty Eight.

"Other craft will have picked up the distress call." Said Mel. "They'll be able to see us on their long range scans too, know that we're closest. We are legally bound to answer any distress....."

"Fine, fine, turn us around for deceleration." He said. "Careful though Mel, we don't want to break anything, they might deduct it from our pay."

The ship was huge and nothing was secured or bolted down. Nothing on mining ships was ever properly secured, it sort of came with the territory. The last thing anyone needed, was to spend hours un-securing heavy equipment and crates of spares. It all just sat there, held in place by their artificial gravity, which was kept at .7 of standard G, to save on running costs. The inertial damping too, was kept to a bare minimum and as Miram, his first officer liked to point out;

"Anyway, I think we got the beta version of the inertial damping system."

Not that Miram was joining in with their chatter. She was too preoccupied with sulking, over a bad sexual encounter on their last planetary stopover. That was the problem with mining planets, as she often told everyone within earshot;

"Too many miners with nothing between their ears, apart from shit and sawdust !"

Destiny Forty Eight turned slowly, the directional thrusters firing sporadically, on low power. Zin felt a little vibration under his feet, enough to make a few things fall over, or roll to where they weren't supposed to be. Nothing dangerous, just damage maybe, to some expensive pieces on mining kit. He wouldn't really have to pay for it, but an inventory was always taken when they returned to base. Damage too much equipment and he might find himself demoted to being someone else's first officer.

"Really gentle with the main thrusters Mel." He said. "As though we're carrying several drums of liquid high explosive."

"We are carrying barrels of liquid..... Oh, I get it !" Said Miram.

"Nice to have you awake Miram." He said. "Keep your hand on the inertial damping control and step it up a bit if it's needed."

"Ok boss."

Strictly his title was commander, but he quite liked the way Miram called him boss. She had an outer colonies accent and accentuated the last 'S' on boss. There were automatic systems of course, if you fancied living really dangerously. They were from Phlot, one of the less affluent Indie worlds, with technology several generations behind that of the Menderan Empire. Mel pressed a large yellow button, using a hand slider to increase thrust from the main Ion drive.

"We have a lot of vibration people !" He yelled. "Do something about it."

"Slight yaw to the left !" Someone shouted.

"I've got it boss." Said Miram. "Easy to sort out."

She did and they were now travelling at the same speed as the vessel broadcasting a distress signal. Not a Phlot vessel, it was putting out a Menderan distress call. Zin just hoped that nothing too valuable had been damaged during their unscheduled manoeuvre. No use telling his boss at Parallax about a legal duty to answer distress calls, he'd still get his balls chewed off.

"Closer now, get us close enough to see her ident." He said.

Destiny Forty Eight didn't do smooth manoeuvres, she just wasn't built for it. The vessel sort of crabbed towards the vessel in distress, using front and rear directional thrusters. It took quite a while, before Zin could see the lettering on the side of what appeared to be, a lifeless derelict.

"That's a Menderan Walker class vessel." Said Mel. "Real cutting edge stuff, capable of going just about anywhere."

"Also used in the sort of research, best kept off world." Added Miram. "Or at least, those are the rumours."

Zin looked at the words on the hull in Menderan, which he couldn't read. Below them was a smaller version of the Ident in the common tongue, which he could read.

'Menderan Science Vessel – Grey Walker.'

Nothing about what to do if it was found drifting though, not a word about that. A huge off world science lab, drifting a long way from Menderan territory and appearing to be lifeless. It was unthinkable, but the proof was right there on the view screen.

"It's huge," said Mel, "we'd fit inside one of its cargo air locks."

"Don't get any weird ideas." Said Zin. "What are our limited array of sensors picking up ?"

"Our comms system has been trying theirs for a while now." Mel replied. "Nothing coming back, on any frequency, even the weird and rarely used ones. Just the low power signal saying 'help us,' in the common tongue."

"They're drifting." Added Miram. "If hurtling through space at about eighty thousand miles per hour, can be called drifting. No shields, no Empire electronic ident.... They're dead boss. I'd use a lifeform scanner, but well, you know why not."

"I know Miram, because we don't have one. We're a mining supply ship with technology a good fifty years out of date. We shouldn't even be wondering what to do ! We'll put a high power location beacon on her and call it in. With luck, the fucking empire might give us medals and a small reward. Get it done people !"

His people weren't rushing about, obeying his orders. Not unusual, they rarely seemed to do anything at a rush. Open rebellion was rare though, they usually did begin to turn his orders into actions, even if a little slowly.

"We should have a look inside." Said Mel. "There might be sick and wounded people on board."

"It's a big research vessel." Added Miram. "There could be a large crew, all needing medical assistance. Then there is also the matter of salvage."

So, the real reason his crew were suddenly developing empathy for injured Menderans. It had crossed his mind too, the likelihood of Grey Walker containing a lot of expensive and sort after technology. They were a long way from anywhere and the emergency transmission was weak. Their long range scanners were a joke, but he had to ask.

"Any other vessels close to us ?" He asked. "I mean close enough to be an annoyance ?"

Miram just shook her head at him.

“Three other vessels did pick up the signal and acknowledged it.” Said Mel. “They all remained on their existing courses, once we confirmed that we were investigating the source of the transmission.”

“No one is likely to arrive and be an annoyance boss.” Said Miram. “We could grab a few high price gadgets and then call it in. A derelict boss ! No one will be that bothered about how much spare kit they were supposed to have on board.”

Zin knew it was a risk, but a relatively small one. Parallax didn't pay that well and getting bonuses out of them was always a fight. A little extra cash, would really make a difference to his life. There were the grandkids now.....

“Could the robots handle it ?” He asked. “There might be a contagion over there, a plague.”

Not just him being over anxious, half of all derelicts were caused by one of the crew bringing a contagion onto the vessel. There were a lot of strange bacteria out there, many of them lethal. Whole planets had been wiped out. Strangely, Miram was actually laughing.

“The robots !? Yep, if we fancy watching them try to walk through glass doors and knock over anything that isn't nailed down.”

She was right, the thirty or so robots they had, were originally intended to carry out all the exterior maintenance. The idea had been to reduce the time crew members spent suited up and bobbing about in the vacuum of space. Parallax had bought cheap though, the bots seemed to have an IQ of about twenty, on a good day. The bots were rarely used for anything.

“Drones then,” he said, “I know we have at least one working drone. I saw Doc outside, fixing something a few days ago.”

People always give technology names and the drone's ID code was DOC0447, so of course they all called him Doc. Why a him and not a her ? No one was really sure.

“Doc can't handle this.” Said Mel. “He only has one working arm. It was damaged about three trips ago and Parallax keep promising to fix it.”

“We need to go.” Said Miram. “Us, people, wearing atmosphere suits.”

Zin frowned; sometimes his crew treated him like a complete fool. He honestly felt he'd earned a little respect, many times over. Such was the loneliness of command. He'd console himself by claiming the major share of anything they looted from Grey Walker.

“Of course one of you needs to go.” He said. “Mel actually, she is the science officer and will know what's worth grabbing.”

Miram looked a little miffed, but simply nodded at Mel.

“Take a grunt from engineering with you.” He said. “A guy, a big one ! Then make him go everywhere first, in case anyone over there begins firing a blaster. Doc can follow you and be my eyes and ears, he doesn't need two arms to do that.”

“He'll just be dead circuits once we enter the Menderan craft.” Said Miram. “Their hull will screen out his control transmissions, it's why we can't simply use scanners to look inside.”

“That is why you're going to run a line over there.” He said.

“But..... that might wake up their computer !” Said Mel.

“Bound to !” Moaned Miram.

Why did his crew only seem to become really interested in just one thing, moaning at him. He was the commander though, no one got paid at the end of the mission, unless he signed it off. It was a useful weapon to get his orders obeyed, but a weapon best kept for a really critical occasion.

“These are my orders !” He barked. “They will be obeyed, or I'll get Doc to anchor that beacon and no one will go on board. Clear !”

They both nodded at him.

“They’ll have a standard emergency socket, everyone has those, even the empire. Run a line over and then attach a beacon to their hull, you’ll probably need to use resin. Important ! Don’t turn the beacon on yet.”

“Oh boss !” Said Miram.

“Hey, you guys treat me like an idiot, have a little back. Then and only then, will you pop their airlock and go inside. Right, get going.”

For once they looked happy, Mel was even rushing somewhere. No doubt off to engineering to find a large engineer, to act as a blaster shield. Zin sat back in his comfy command chair, flicking a few buttons to bring Doc out of his bay. One armed and well overdue for a service he might be, but he was the only working drone they had.

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Sventa came over the top of the beautiful sculpted hill and didn’t bother firing her blaster. It wasn’t going to do anything to the creature heading towards her. Something from another dimension was wading across the ornamental lake, maybe even from an alternative reality. There were advantages to spending many years as part of the Menderan imperial court; she’d seen some extraordinary things. She’d seen the trick before, though usually it was delicate lifeforms, with gossamer wings. The Chalné had gardens in his imperial palace; huge gardens ordered by colour, rather than plant type or habitat requirements. In the red garden, she’d seen marvellous creatures, held in what looked like glass tanks. Everything was in there, the plants they fed on, the air they breathed and water with just the right chemical composition. If she looked carefully, there even seemed to be a miniature sun, right up in the corner of an artificial sky.

“They’re so beautiful, how is it done ?” She’d asked him.

“A trick Sventa, a cage that isn’t a cage. Your mind expects specimens in a glass tank, so that is what you see.”

She’d crouched down low, trying to see right to the very top of the tank, but all she saw was sky and a sun, which dazzled her eyes.

“How, how is it done ?”

“And ruin the trick.”

“Please, tell me Sikush, or I think I’ll go crazy. How is it done ?”

He’d laughed at her for a while, watching her attempt to see the world inside the glass tank.

Eventually he’d taken pity on her and given her an explanation, of sorts. Like all his explanations, it led to other questions, which were rarely answered.

“The trick is the glass, only there to grab your attention. It isn’t required, does nothing, apart from averting your gaze from the real trick.”

“Which is ?” She’d asked.

“Look around you Sventa, this is my red garden. Not just plants, but their complete eco systems, brought here in miniature. Worlds that cannot co-exist, yet the delicate blooms and insects of the Algarian deserts, fly about beside the Nesh bugs from the rifts. I would wager, you probably didn’t even question how it was done.”

“No I didn’t. I’ve sat here many times, never thinking about walking across the stream to touch the plants.”

“No one ever does,” he’d told her, “that would be impolite. You couldn’t anyway, the force fields are just beyond the stream. Prodigious amounts of energy are needed to hold it all in place, to stop the impossibly different worlds from colliding. You see creature held in force bubbles, kept apart, yet

seemingly part of one continuous garden. The life in the tank is different though, it is a bubble projected from another reality.”

Her interest in the tank was renewed, as he’d known it would be. Chlo had always told her that Sikush was at least half showman. She’d understood it that day, his ability to dazzle, delight and confuse.

“A vital skill for any great leader.” Chlo had once told her.

Sikush had put his hand through the glass, grabbing hold of a delicate creature, with a dozen or more exquisitely coloured wings. She had almost told him to be careful. He’d held the living creature out, letting her see it better.

“From another world Sventa and an alternative reality. I had a long argument once with Nurigen, about these creatures. He held the view that once they are brought here, they really can’t be said to exist at all. I think he was wrong !”

He’d closed his fist, making her gasp, as he appeared to crush those beautiful wings. It had to be dead, nothing but dust in his hand. Miraculously as he opened his hand, the creature was still there, unharmed.

“Nothing here can harm it.” He’d told her. “It exists outside of our reality and is inviolate in ours.”

Like all good showmen, he’d kept a little extra trick back to amaze her. His hand went through the glass, placing the fragile life back in its own world. Sventa had pushed her own hand out, only to have it bounce off the glass tank. Sikush had merely smiled at her.

“You have to let me keep some of my tricks secret.” He’d told her.

Sventa understood how the monster had been projected into their reality, a Roruss no less. A mythical beast to many, though the dark angels knew of them. A creature that couldn’t be killed by any weapon in their reality, or at least that was part of the legend. Only killable by one weapon and that had been made by an invoker of Leng. The Tooth of Arcadis, a weapon forged in Ancient Leng and lost for countless millennia.

“You can’t kill it !” She shouted. “Keep out of its way, this battle is mine.”

Not that she hoped to kill it, but she did have some grasp of what had been needed, to bring the Roruss into their reality. Energy, huge amounts it, the entire output of the average sun for millions of years. A truly prodigious amount of energy, few could attempt to harness and use that much power.

“Haan !” She shouted. “Look for an energy device, something portable. They’ll look like a local, maybe even a child holding a toy, but something will look out of place.”

He had his blaster slung over his shoulder now, realising it was useless against the monster striding out of the lake. He looked useless and probably felt it. Hopefully she was giving him a role, a task to perform, even if it was looking for a needle in a large haystack.

“Get others to help.” She said. “Find that energy device and we can return the Roruss to wherever it came from.”

“How do we do that ?” He asked.

“By finding the device and destroying it. Quick Haan, I can only keep it busy for so long.”

The Roruss was big, looked like domestic cattle, it even had two horns. Larger though, much larger and no domestic cattle had ever had several rows of wicked looking teeth. It ground them, as it looked at her and charged. Sventa scanned her memory for any weakness the monster might have and came up with nothing. It had no weaknesses, which was the main problem with shifting monsters across realities, it rendered them inviolable. Like the delicate creature Sikush had tried to crush in his fist, the already unstoppable Roruss, was now even tougher.

“Come on then !” She yelled at it.

Sventa fell onto her back, letting the creature run right over the top of her. She reverted to her most primitive weapons, the sharp talons on her hands and feet. She raked them along its belly, causing it to shriek and howl in rage. Not in pain though, there was no mark on its skin where her powerful talons had been dragged over its flesh. She was up on her feet as it turned in a wide circle, to come back and attack her again. No fooling it a second time, dropping to the ground invited getting one of its horns in her stomach.

"There, there, I see it !" Arran was shouting at her.

Damn him, the fool seemed to be molesting a poor woman, who was doing no harm at all. Sventa had other worries though, mainly several tons of angry Roruss. She wasn't like most dark angels though, she still had the skills of someone born a Genova, an angel. Most of the spells she knew were to do with healing, but one was destructive and could often kill an enemy with a single touch. Somewhere deep down she knew it was useless, the damn thing couldn't be killed. Still, just hurting it would make her feel better.

"Please Haan, find that power source." She muttered.

Sventa stood her ground, feeling for the right spell, holding up her right arm. It had to be like that, no more ducking and avoiding meeting the monster head on. It was the only way to deliver the power of the spell, her hand had to connect with its flesh and its snout was as good a place as any. She might well end up on the ground with her entrails spread over the well-manicured lawns, but with luck, she'd hurt it.

"Come on !" She yelled.

Contact, hand on its nose and then she was being trampled under its powerful hooves. It had shrieked a little though, as though she'd actually manage to hurt it. Actually it was more of a squawk than a shriek, a definite sound of pain and discomfort. Once it had gone by, she rolled over onto her side and watched it.

"I hurt you, bastard !" She yelled.

Genova were strange creatures, existing in many worlds, yet belonging in none. Their spells too, worked in many realities and hers was still causing it some pain. The mighty Roruss rubbed its face against the ground, as if trying to remove a stinging insect. It roared, it stomped and most encouragingly, it looked badly hurt. There was actually a green ichor flowing from its nose, which was probably what it used for blood. Crap ! She might just be able to kill it, if she survived long enough to use the spell another three or four times.

"Eight great demon gods!" She yelled. "Grant me at least the strength to get up on my feet."

She was hurt, though none of her insides seemed to be spilling out. Her left leg was broken, probably in several places, but she could still stand upright on just her right leg. Something was broken inside, something causing quite a bit of pain. That too could be ignored and fixed later, if she survived.

Sventa tottered about on her one good leg, using her wings to keep her balance, fluttering them in the slight breeze. She readied the spell again.

"Come on then !" She yelled.

How intelligent was it ? The look in its eyes held hate, it certainly understood who had caused it so much pain. It snorted in anger, causing more green fluid to flow out of its nostrils.

"I did that to you !" She yelled. "Come and let me hurt you again !"

It barked at her, the famous Roruss bark, which few survived to talk about. Sventa knew that she only had one more chance to kill it. One more trampling and she'd be dead, but with luck, she'd take the monster with her. The Roruss picked up speed, aiming its right horn at her head. Faster, faster it came, until..... It vanished !

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Zin Ganaan adjusted the zoom on the view screen, watching Mel and the engineer, as they clung to the side of Grey Walker. The beacon was fixed in place and a line had been run across to provide just enough power to open the airlock and communicate with Doc, once he was inside. The drone was currently hanging back, bobbing about and keeping its cameras aimed at Mel and..... Who was it ?

“Who did she take ?” He asked Miram.

“Nate, large, muscular and brighter than most in engineering.”

Doc worried him more than the humans outside, they were reliable, but Doc was becoming a little skittish. Standard drone layout with rotors to provide lift if there was an atmosphere and thrusters if there wasn't. For some reason their one and only working drone, was spinning his rotor in the near vacuum of deep space. Not at full speed, but it was weird.

“Did you run diagnostics on Doc ?” He asked.

“The diagnostics system is playing up.” Replied Miram. “He's done this before and it doesn't deplete his power pack that much.”

Miram speak for shut up and don't worry about what can't be fixed. There just seemed to be a lot of their systems that had developed faults, which Parallax Mining never fixed.

“Popping the outer lock.” Said Mel.

Good, their comms were nice and clear, that was something. Zin watched her lift a small outside hatch and wait. Gradually the outside airlock door, slid open. It was a little sad, that even a derelict, seemed to have an airlock that opened smoother than theirs. He could see Mel and Nate, looking into the dark interior of the airlock. Doc seemed to be working properly, he turned on his lights and moved closer, as soon as Zin pressed the right buttons.

“We're going inside.” Said Nate.

They moved inside the airlock, Doc's lights illuminating the interior. Luckily Doc decided to stop spinning his rotor, which had been causing some concern. Rotor blades and people in space suits, weren't a good mix.

“No artificial gravity in here.” Said Mel. “If anyone is alive, they'll be floating about in zero G.”

Another small panel and two more manual switches;

“Air is coming in, we're pressurising.” Said Mel.

It was strangely stressful, watching the inner hatch open. No one knew what to expect and the empty white painted corridor, was a bit of an anti-climax. Doc had a few basic sensors, which were picking up an atmosphere that was fresh and breathable. The problem was, that it was currently at minus a hundred and fifty degrees.

“You're inside a freezer Mel, deep cold.” He told her.

She wiped her gloved hand over the wall, showing him the layer of ice on it.

“Looks like the power has been off for days.” She said. “Whatever happened here, occurred some time ago.”

Everything glittered, where the water vapour in the air, had turned into ice, which covered everything in a thin layer of glittering crystal. It looked beautiful, but it meant that all he crew were probably dead. The corridor led to a six way junction, with no signs to give a clue to where each corridor went to.

“I guess if you belong here, you know the way.” Said Mel.

“Left, go left.” Said Zin. “Treat it like a maze and keep turning left until you've been everywhere.”

“Fine, but it's a huge vessel.” Answered Mel.

Their boots were designed to grip the metal runway that went down the side of the corridor. Another one of the standard safety features, which everyone adhered to. Magnetic boots were a pain to walk in, staggeringly tiring, but they seemed to be making good progress. They came to a set of swing doors, with something in Menderan written above them.

“Observation Room.” Said Miram. “No idea what that might mean.”

Very low temperatures do strange things to bodies. There is a drying effect, a kind of mummification, that can leave them looking almost as they did in life, for decades. There were stories of old derelicts, hundreds of years old. And inside them had been found bodies, looking so well preserved that they might have been taking a nap. That most definitely wasn't the case with the crew of Grey Walker.

“Oh Shit ! Are you seeing all this commander ?” Asked Mel.

“Yes, I'm getting Doc to take a few readings.”

They'd been torn apart, by what appeared to have been teeth. A throat ripped out, an arm torn off, the ice covering the walls was tinged with red. Doc was telling him the story, but doing it with some very basic scanners and an old and slow analyser. Still, the answer was the same as his own eyes were telling him. The crew had been killed by some kind of beast, using claws and teeth.

“Draw weapons and get out of there !” He ordered. “Now, run carefully, but run !”

For two people in space suits, carrying blasters and wearing magnetic boots, they moved at fairly good pace. Zin kept Doc behind them, illuminating the corridor as best he could. He noticed something at the six way junction, something glinting in Doc's lights.

“Stop !” He ordered. “Wait ! There's something in front of you.”

Confusion with Nate firing at something and the sound of someone screaming, a female voice, it had to be Mel.

“I'll get suited up.” Said Miram.

“No !” He barked. “We just deliver mining spares, we're not soldiers.”

They were dead, Doc was showing no life signs for Mel or Nate. It had all happened so fast, what had killed them ? He carefully had Doc move his cameras around, until they were all aiming at the body, which until a few seconds before, had been his science officer. There was a lot of blood, which was rapidly freezing, covering the floor in twinkling red crystals. Mel's suit had been ripped apart and a head was using rows of sharp teeth to dig into her chest.

“Fuck boss ! It's eating her !” Said Miram. “Let me go over there.”

“No ! I'm not losing any more of my crew.”

“What the hell is that boss ?”

“I have no idea Miram. Just keep recording everything. Someone will want to see it all, when we get back to Phlot.”

Oh yes, a lot of people would want to see the creature, which had probably killed the entire crew of Destiny Forty Eight. About twice the size of his crew and covered in short fur. Zin had never heard of any primate that could function at minus a hundred and fifty, but it seemed happy in the deep cold. It was pushing its jaws into Mel, pulling out tissue from her chest, before chewing it and swallowing. He heard Miram being sick and just hoped it wasn't all going over her computer console.

“Definitely a primate.” He muttered. “Hands, it has hands.”

He'd heard of constructs being developed by the military of various planetary groups and wondered if he was looking at one of them, an artificial construct. He noticed its green eyes, when it looked up and took an interest in Doc. The drone stopped transmitting, about two seconds later.

“Are you alright Miram ?” He asked.

"I don't think I'll ever be alright again. It ate her ! It ate Mel and probably Nate too."

"I know, but we're going home now and there are a few things to do." He said. "The line needs pulling out of the derelict and the beacon needs turning on. Are you up to ? I'd send a robot, but we both know they're useless."

"That's fine Boss, I'll suit up and do it."

Zin found himself trembling after she'd gone. He'd been a military pilot once, losing comrades all the time. In the end he'd stopped getting to know people, it made coping with the deaths a lot easier. Mel and Nate weren't just crew, he knew their families, knew them well. Crap ! People weren't supposed to die when delivering mining equipment. There was a message to send though, encrypted and sent via the usual relay systems. Not as quick as empire transmissions, but Parallax would get it within an hour. Mendera too, they were bound to intercept it and send a team to recover Grey Walker. He just hoped they were well armed.

"Priority transmission from Parallax Mining vessel Destiny Forty Eight." He began. "This is Commander Zin Ganaan. We responded to an emergency transmission, a distress call. On investigation we found a Menderan research vessel Grey Walker, drifting in deep space. A beacon has been placed on her hull, I'll attach the relevant Ident and location. Sadly while heroically trying to save any of the crew who might still be alive, two of my crew lost their lives. Details will be attached. It is my opinion that Grey Walker is a lifeless derelict, all its crew killed by some kind of unknown creature. Please inform Mendera about this incident, so that they can deal with the situation."

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Haan helped her to stand, acting as a living crutch. Sveta hurt just about everywhere, though she knew her body would heal eventually, it always did. The leg bones would need setting though, an annoyance that might put her out of action for a while.

"Arran killed it." Said Haan. "Pity really, it might have talked."

Arran was looking pleased with himself, standing next to the body of a woman, who was carrying a child in pouch round her chest. Only it wasn't a child and she hadn't really been a woman.

"I saw her fiddling with something." Said Arran. "Inside the baby, fiddling with something inside the baby ! I didn't have a weapon, so I got her with a rock. Got her pretty damn good !"

The child was just a doll, though a very lifelike one. It had been broken apart by Arran and his rock, broken circuitry showing inside its torso. The controller for the energy transmission. Once it had been destroyed, the Roruss would have gone back to being someone else's problem, in another reality. If it lived of course, her spell did seem to have severely injured it. A dead Roruss, turning up in an alternative reality. It was the sort of thing that caused myths and legends to begin.

"I need to see the woman, or whatever it is." She said. "I can't bend, lift it up to me."

Arran helped, he seemed think of himself as one of her personal guard now. He'd certainly earned his keep and a permanent promotion away from ever being Seren's lunch. Three of them it took, to hold the dead body up to her eyes.

"It looks like living tissue." Said Itzel. "Though it might be just a covering of flesh and not a living creature at all."

"It needs to go to Mendera." She said. "Chlo will know what it is and what to do with it. Someone dig the other creature out a bit more. I need to see more of it."

One of her dark angels used their talons, to dig the other creature out of the flesh that covered it. Silver, it looked like a silicon life form, but those were rare. Barely the size of a new-born child, the silvery creature had been deep inside the woman. That body might have been just a disguise, or

perhaps more. Maybe the creature inside it had controlled it, like a flesh robot. Maybe even the creature inside was yet another device, controlled remotely? Sventa had a million questions in her head and answers to none of them. Plus her broken leg was throbbing and giving her stabbing pains, at the same time.

“Get it into the shuttle.” She told Haan. “Cover it up as best you can, it all needs to go back to Chlo.”

“What do you think it is my president?” Asked Seren.

“I have lots of idea, all of which might be wrong. Did we lose anyone in the fight with the Roruss?”

“No, just a few light wounds my president.”

She was about to give the order to leave and take the strange bodies to Mendera. Pesallia could wait until another day, after her leg had been set properly and her innards no longer felt as though they were on fire.

“Are they here to help, or try to arrest us?” Asked Haan.

The army had arrived, the sky was suddenly full of military shuttles, their ground forces probably not far behind. Unlike Sventa’s pilot, they took little care about where they landed. Statues were knocked over and crushed, whole rows of beautiful trees destroyed. Luckily the people using the park had long since fled, so there was no likelihood of the public being injured. Sventa did notice that no weapons were being aimed at her people, the army of Pesallia wasn’t that stupid.

“They don’t get the bodies or whatever they are.” She said. “If we have to kill every soldier on this crap heap of a planet, these bodies are going to Chlo.”

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Rhian was quite enjoying her time on Mo’s shuttle. She was currently flying the craft, as they’d left his pilot on Mendera. It had seemed unfair to involve him in their plans. The vessels AI wasn’t going to win any prizes, all the money had obviously gone into luxuries, which was quite fortunate for them. There was a ridiculously large kitchen, complete with enough stored food and drink, to last for months. Kerr joined her, looking fed up as he sprawled himself over the co-pilots seat.

“Any luck?” She asked.

“No, everything is designed not to be fiddled with. I can cut out the Ident system, but several other systems will go too. Some we could live without, but not the navigation matrix.”

“I can see how that would be a problem.” She said. “So we’ve got to live with broadcasting our Ident to everyone who might be in range?”

Poor Kerr, he’d been so certain that he could make their shuttle a little more silent running.

“I’m afraid so.” He replied. “The range of the transmission isn’t huge. All we can do is hope that no empire vessel spots us on their long range scanners.”

Mo had been quite pragmatic about their situation, thinking that they might not be on any imperial watch list at all. He seemed to believe that Chlo might have an inkling about the nature of their mission and be turning a blind eye towards it. He was currently sleeping, as was Silky. They’d decided to sleep in shifts, two on, two off. It appeared that the shuttles creators had thought that anyone who could afford to buy it, was likely to have plenty of flight crew. The autopilot was part of the on board AI and it was useless. After suggesting a course perilously close to an active Nebula, they’d decided not to use it. Now there were two people at the controls, day and night. Not that those terms had much meaning in space.

“I’ll go and wake them, it’s their shift.” She said. “It was their shift about half an hour ago.”

“I’ll go.” Said Kerr.

He didn't need to, a very sleepy looking Mo walked onto the flight deck. Silky was nowhere to be seen, but she couldn't fly the shuttle anyway. No apology for being late of course, Mo didn't seem the apologetic type. He just looked at the navigation screens.

"Anything happening?" He asked.

"We can't turn off the squawk box." Said Kerr.

Mo tapped the screen showing their current position, relative to the imperial star charts. She had no idea why he did it. Mo seemed to have a lot of eccentric habits.

"We seem to be officially in the arse end of nowhere." He said. "No one is likely to find us out here." It was as if fate had been waiting for the moment, just that right second to prove Mo wrong. They were hailed, by a craft broadcasting on the empire's encrypted channels. A male voice, a rather elderly male voice.

"This is imperial fleet Ident #6667.34. Though you might know me as The Old One. Rather an annoying name, quite insulting really. But it has been used by those silly girls for millennia now, so I'm stuck with it."

Mo was suddenly animated. There was no visible comms system, the craft had been designed for rich people, with no real understanding of technology. You just spoke and the craft sent your reply. True, it often broadcast every sound on the flight deck, but no system is ever perfect.

"I am so glad to hear your voice." Said Mo. "You're not on our long range scanners. How long until you get here?"

"We are here Mo, my entire fleet is here. Cloaked, so that you weren't worried about the appearance of my vessels."

"Who the hell is that Mo?" Asked Rhian.

"The Old One of course. Rumoured to be and quite likely is, the empire's doomsday weapon and official executioner."

Silky finally showed up, looking at them as though wanting them to be less noisy.

"I've seen your craft before." Said Mo.

"Yes, but things have changed since then, they look more..... Organic. I will turn off their cloaking devices. Don't be alarmed by what you see."

It was just as well he'd issued the warning. Their shuttle was surrounded, by craft that looked as though they'd been grown, rather than built. Not grown from anything nice either, the theme seemed to be mollusc and all things slimy. Even Mo seemed shocked.

"Wow, that is.....Different." He said.

"Shock and awe I'm told Mo, shock and awe."

"I'm glad they're on our side." Said Kerr.

"I can bring your shuttle into my main cargo bay." Said The Old One. "Is that alright?"

"Where is he taking us?" Asked Silky. "Where are you taking us!?" She yelled.

There was a slight pause.

"Yes, sorry. A Kittara lookalike, who isn't really her of course. She visited me and said you need help getting to a freighter in the Udaries Nebula."

"Take control of our shuttle." Said Mo. "Take us into your cargo bay and thank you for helping."

The lights dimmed for a few seconds, as every control on the flight deck, was turned off. They were moving though, towards an open airlock in the side of The Old One.

"What is he like?" Asked Rhian. "This Old One."

"He is the craft." Answered Mo. "The one were moving towards. More accurately he's a very ancient AI system that works for The Chaln ."

“Oh, an AI.” She said. “I like Chlo, you can see her eyes, get an idea of what is going on in her head. Eyes are important, does this Old One have a face. Are there eyes ?”

“No I don’t have eyes !” Boomed through the control deck.

She’d forgotten that he might hear her. She mouthed ‘sorry’ at Mo, who just shrugged at her and chuckled.

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Delmus had seen the Lummel many times before, but their appearance was always a shock. Grotesques faces, permanently creased into a frown. It was hard to picture then as ever being The Chalné’s famed holy warriors. He and Alyz both remained silent, as they walked into the small craft, which was to take them through the wall and beyond the world where everything familiar to them existed. When they were moving and both of the dour looking crew, seemed occupied. Then Alyz spoke a thought, that he’d often had himself.

“I don’t care what oath they broke.” She said. “The punishment was too severe.”

“Luri says they are used to being as they now are.” He replied.

“Are they all like that ? Even the children ?”

He had to think about it for a moment.

“There must be children, yet I have never seen them. Luri believes they have become reconciled to their existence and without them, there is no way through the wall.”

“None at all ?” She asked.

“I was once pulled into the darkness beyond the wall, by Sventa. She nearly died and I was seriously hurt. If Luri hadn’t healed us both..... So no, there is no other feasible way through. Luri can visit my dreams, which is nice. Never as good as the real thing though.”

The seats were as hard as iron and the wall was still a long way off. They’d be on the uncomfortable vessel for hours, yet it was the only way through the wall. How was it propelled, how did it hover without falling onto the rocks below ? Delmus had no idea ! To him it was all part of the fractured reality of the wastes.

“You must love her, to go through all this so often.” Said Alyz

A comment she’d made before, which he felt uncomfortable answering. He smiled at her and shifted his buttocks about on the hard seat. It was going to be a very long journey.

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